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Editorial

Editor's Diary

On 26th March, we reached Ramnagar (6 hours taxi drive from Delhi), with the intention to spend 4 days in the Corbett Tiger Reserve. This exciting holiday was made possible by the invitation of Mr Rajiv Bhartari, Deputy Director of the C.T.R. and the generosity of Mr Dilip Khatau of the Corbett Foundation. The Foundation has been set up to assist the Forest Department in their difficult task of saving the tiger from its calamatious depletion. For example, the Foundation has taken the responsibility of compensating farmers for cattle killed by tigers immediately on hearing of a kill. Mr Akshobh Singh of the Foundation arrives at the site within the shortest lapse of time, and arranges payment almost immediately, in case of a genuine tiger kill. This prevents the owner of the cattle killed from poisoning the carcass to take his revenge on the tiger. There have been 5 cases of tigers poisoned in this manner during the past 4 months. Without exaggeration the situation is grim.

Corbett Lodge, where we arrived on the 26th, is one of the finest places I have ever stayed in. It is sited on the bank of the Kosi river in whose clear waters we could see Mahseer and shoals of fish while having our tea in the verandah. A hundred common rose finches *Carpodacus erythrinus* exploded like fireworks from a tree overhanging the building. It was a rare sight and the birds performed for us on several occasions; a Himalayan pied kingfisher on the other side of the river was another exciting encounter.

On the 27th we went on to Dhikala (52 miles from Ramnagar). We were there till the 29th, and my daughter Shama Chowdhury, listed the birds we saw, which are reproduced in this issue. Every time you visit a Sanctuary there are some scenes which stick in your mind forever just because of their beauty. The sightings which will always be thrilling to recall were ohe, of a chestnut-headed bee eater high up on a Sal tree with the sun burnishing its crown. The Flame of the Forest trees *Butea monosperma* Palas in bloom, scattered around, added to the glory of the scene. Secondly it is said that waterfowl over a wetland is one of the most beautiful sights of our world, and many birdwatchers will agree with this statement. For me in Corbett the sight of 4 Brahminy duck, ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* honking overhead above the Ramganga river and displaying to perfection in the evening light their brown, cream and black plumage, is another memory which time will not erase. How so-called sportsmen derive pleasure from murdering such birds is a mystery.

On the 29th, we were back in Ramnagar where at a Conservation Centre built through local initiative, I was asked to speak on birds and also on the early years of Project Tiger when I was a member of the Steering Committee. My daughter, Zahida Whitaker, gave a talk on reptiles and showed a film on the King Cobra (by Rom Whitaker) which is a model of what natural history films should be like.

On 30th March in Delhi, I again saw, as I had reported last year at the same time, large numbers of white-backed vultures on trees on both sides of Shah Jahan road in the heart of our capital. The reason, according to some, is that large trees for roosting have vanished from the countryside so the birds roost in the city and forage in adjoining rustic areas.

On 2nd April we were in Kihim, the place about which I have written so often. The first upsetting sight was the village tank where Salim Ali did his famous observation on the bayas and which for a few years was designated as a Sanctuary. It has now been leased out for fishing, and the result is that all the vegetation and most of the birds, including the two species of jacanas, have vanished, and only the kingfishers and a few hardy species like egrets and pond herons remain. I have

Amravati Nature Conservation Society, who was with me in Melghat (though not when I saw the above two birds), reports that he has seen them in larger numbers at wetlands in Amravati district. This may be worth following up.

References

Ali, S. and Ripley, S. Dillon. 1983. *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan : Compact Edition.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Email communication from Prachi Mehta, Wildlife Institute of India (4 February, 1998), and Taej Mundkur, Wetlands International (9 February, 1998).

REDBREASTED PARAKEETS. *ANISH P. ANDHERIA, 2, Sagar Building, V. P. Road, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 058*

The redbreasted parakeets are very much a part and parcel of my neighbourhood. They are easy to observe due to their vociferous nature and I see them almost every day on the *Michelia champaca* tree near my house. In fact, their number has also risen to approx. 25. It is quite clear that they have adapted themselves excellently to this alien environment. The question that constantly haunts me is regarding the effect of such accidental introduction of a bird species on the native varieties which compete with them for food (esp. the rose ringed parakeet). There is a possibility that they have begun spreading in other parts of the city as I've heard of another small flock near Thane city (not confirmed). I would like readers to throw some light on this.

BIRDING ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. *Mrs. PRAGATI NAYAK, Aashirwad, Sampe, P. O. Aryapu, Puttur 574 210*

If you remember, I did mention in a previous letter to you that we have a small wooden birdhouse in our garden. A pair of magpie robins are nesting in it at present. They had just begun to build the nest a few weeks ago when I happened to pass by it one day. The male bird flew past my head and settled in a perch outside the house, with a couple of twigs in his beak. I stopped to watch and he stiffened at my presence. And then he did something I found really strange - he began to sing while still holding the twigs in his beak!

Whether he was calling to his mate to keep clear of the house because danger lurked nearby or whether he was trying to make me believe that he was simply passing the time of day and not nesting at all, I don't know. He kept calling while all the time holding the twigs in the beak, making mincemeat of the old Fox and the crow fable. I stood as still as possible trying to blend with the scenery but the bird would have none of it. He turned his back on one and continued to sing, occasionally looking over his shoulder at me, willing me to go away. Finally tiring of standing in the sun, I went indoors, so what I want to ask is — is it normal for a bird to be able to sing freely with is beak full?

There are plenty of tailor birds around my house. Sometimes whole flocks of them get terribly excited and create a dreadful din, jumping and hopping about for no apparent reason, and then suddenly stop. Why do they to this? I haven't seen any predator or anything near them while they create the noise and confusion.

Another thing I want to discuss is Sunday mornings. In the article — Stopping by the woods on a Sunday morning — which appeared in the Nov-Dec 1997 issue of the Newsletter, Dr Salim Ali ends by saying "... how few are there who will sacrifice their Sunday morning sleep." I'm sure most lovers of the outdoors are early risers and certainly it's a rare birdwatcher indeed who is not an early riser and who has to "sacrifice" his Sunday morning sleep. I feel so strongly about Sunday mornings that I simply cannot resist writing to you about it. I am one birdwatcher who waits all week for Sunday mornings.

As a homemaker, I can hardly call the morning my own on weekdays. But on Sundays Everyone is a late riser in my family (excluding myself) who like to sleep even later on Sundays. So on Sunday, I slip out of the house as soon as it gets reasonably light and spend the next two hours in the blissful company of the birds. As I mentioned in the previous letter all my birdwatcing is done around my house. I simply grab my binoculars and walk around drinking in the beauty of the early morning. Of course I see the same species of birds from one Sunday to another but the joy never lessens. Now and then when I see a bird which is not a regular visitor, my day is really made — an Indian pitta or a white-headed myna or a paradise flycatcher, or a Lotens sunbird or chestnut-headed bee eaters or black-headed munias etc. etc. I am in paradise when I sit alone with the birds, knowing that I am not needed in the kitchen just now. Everybody is asleep and I can simply sit here with the birds for as long as I like. I love Sunday mornings.

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES. *S. ASHOK KUMAR IAS (Retd.) Plot No. 491, Road No. 10, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad 500 034 — (Accompanied by S L BANSAL)*

I. Breeding of the coot (*Fulica atra* Linn)

During the 1998 Asian Waterfowl Count on 30.1.1998 in Gangavaram lake, situated 25 kms south-east of Hyderabad city, I observed a group of 20 sub-adult coots swimming amidst the adult birds numbering 200+. Obviously this lake is a breeding ground for coots. The earlier breeding record further south was from Kazipet made by N R Nadarajan, P A Azeez and C R Ajhithkumar (August 1993, JBNHS **90** : 289).

II. Sunbathing by Sub-adult painted storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*)

During a visit to the National Zoological Park, New Delhi on 10th January 1998, my friend SL Bansal and I noticed a few painted storks and sub-adult birds near their nests on *Acacia nilotica* trees in the Nilgai enclosure. Covered with a brown coat on their head and neck, the sub adults were facing the sun with outstretched wings. We watched them for nearly 15 to 20 minutes and it appeared that they were sunbathing in the chill morning hours.

III. Whitebreasted kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis* Linn) Feeding on a checkered keelback water snake

While walking along trail No.3 in L-Block of Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur on 13th January 1998 we chanced to see a whitebreasted kingfisher landing on a Kadam tree branch with its prey. Focussing our binoculars we could clearly see the bird firmly holding a small sized checkered Keelback Water snake (*Xenochrophis piscator*). Soon after, the bird started smashing its prey against the branch and devour it slowly.

IV. Jackal with its kill in Keoladeo National park, Bharatpur

While proceeding on trail No.2 to Python point on 14th January 1998 in Keoladeo National park, Bharatpur, we saw a jackal skulking away with a pond heron (*Ardeola grayii*) in its mouth.

V. Dead peahen (*Pavo cristatus*) Feasted upon by treepies (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*)

While on the road on the chill winter morning on 20th January 1998 in Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, we came across a leopard kill, a peahen which was being feasted upon by a number of tree pies.

MORE THAN 70,000 TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) SIGHTED AGAIN ON THE RIVER GANGES, MALDA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL. *ARUNAYAN SHARMA, Green Peoples India, Pranta Pally, P.O. & Dist Malda 732 101, West Bengal*

For the Waterfowl Census 1998, in our district Malda, on 23rd January, 1998, I went to Farakka Barrage to count waterfowl on behalf of "Green Peoples India".

Farakka Barrage constructed over the river Ganges, connects two adjacent districts Malda and Murshidabad both by road and railway on National Highway 34. The overall span of the Barrage is 1200 m. The Barrage is strictly protected because it is the only one of the kind in our country, and is situated in a border district. Through this distribution system water is given to our neighbouring country Bangladesh from time to time.

At around 08.15 hours during the counting I saw twelve large flocks of tufted duck *(Aythya fuligula*) resting on the river Ganges, a few were very near to the river banks. I counted them from the river bank of malda, several times, each group separately. Again, I walked down to the opposite river bank side (Murshidabad). Counting from both the sides, the total number of ducks recorded were 70,000+. The numbers were more than what I recorded during the last waterfowl census (1997) in our district. Last time I recorded about 50,000 tufted duck (NLBW, **37**(4) : 65) from the same place on 30 January 1997.

ON A LARGE CONGREGATION OF NORTHERN LAPWINGS *Vanellus vanellus* IN KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK, ASSAM. *MAAN BARUA, "Barua Bhavan", 107, M.C. Road, Uzan Bazaar, Guwahati 781 001, Assam*

On 16 November 1997, I conducted the annual Salim Ali Bird Count in the Eastern (Agaratoli) Range of Kaziranga National Park (26 ° 35' - 26 ° 45' N and 93 ° 05' - 93 ° 40' E). At about 12 hrs 30, while counting waterfowl at Shola Beel (an ox-bow lake) I came across a few medium-sized waders, which I identified as Northern lapwings *Vanellus vanellus.* As I approached nearer, the birds took to flight and I gauged there were at least a hundred birds in the flock. They landed a few metres ahead among some more birds of the same species. On closer observation I estimated that there were about 400 individuals in the flock ! They were foraging in short grass (mainly *Haemarthia compressa* grazed by herbivores such as Asiatic Water Buffalo *Bubalus bubalis* and Indian One-horned Rhino *Rhinoceros unicornis.* All birds I observed in detail were in winter plumage, the black band on the breast being easily noticeable.

According to Ali and Ripley (Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan. Vol. 2 : 210-211) the Northern lapwing is a winter visitor to the Indian Sub-continent and "keeps in pairs or scattered flocks". I have encountered small flocks of 10-15 birds regularly in Kaziranga during the last five years in the Park. The largest number recorded by me was in the same area on 14 November 1995 when I saw c 60 birds together. There is a record of c 200 Northern lapwings in Burha-Chapori WLS during the winter of 1993-1994 (Manideep Raj and Soumen Das verbally). However, a large concentration of c 400 birds is exceptional and to the best of my knowledge, has not been recorded in northeastern India before.

RECURRENCE OF YELLOW-LEGGED GREEN PIGEON AND BARN OWL IN GWALIOR. *DR. RAJIV SAXENA, M-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior 474 011 (M.P.)*

The distribution of yellow-legged green pigeon *Treron phoenicoptera* and barn owl *Tyto alba* covers the entire Indian subcontinent, the latter being a universal bird. But their place-wise distribution and abundance is not exactly known. In Gwalior (26 ° 14' N - 78 ° 16' E) in north-west Madhya Pradesh, they have never been common. Upto 1982, they were sometimes sighted in densely wooded areas in and around Gwalior. Since then I have not seen them in the six districts namely, Morena, Bhind, Gwalior, Datia, Shivpuri and Guna, during my numerous visits to these places.

Their disappearance from Gwalior may be attributed to the cutting down of a large number of trees including *Ficus* spp. to clear the land to construct large residential colonies and broaden the roads.

During our fortnightly birdwatching trip, in the cool morning of 5th October 1997, I saw nearly 150 yellow-legged green pigeons coming out in ones and twos from inside a Peepal tree standing behind the agriculture nursery along the Race Course Road in Gwalior. Since then they have been sighted twice again.